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Oral Interview of Ralph Green by Mazie Hough and Peggy Danielson for the Feminist Oral History Project (Part #1)

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Oral Interviews for the Feminist Oral History Project.

Interviewer: Mazie Hough (MH), Peggy Danielson (PD)

Interviewee: Ralph Green (RG)

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[Start of transcript]

MH: This is Mazie Hough, I'm sitting with Ralph Green and Peggy Danielson in the conference room of 101 Fernald Hall. It is September 21st, Monday, September 21st and we're talking to Ralph Green about his involvement with Spruce Run. I want to tell you before we start about what we're going to do with these tapes once we're finished with them. They will be housed in The Maine Folklife Center and scholars who are interested in activism or Maine history will have access to them through there. We'll be asking you to sign a consent form at the end of the interview to make sure that you agree with this. OK. The first question we have is, how did you get involved with Spruce Run?

RG: I got involved with Spruce Run through my involvement with Kay Lucas. K had a house on Hammond Street in Bangor. We called it the Hammond Street house; it was sort of a... and I lived there for a while, I rented a room from her. It was at the tail end of the inner-city ministries just before it went out of business you might say. And we used to meet around the kitchen table with different ideas, a lot of ideas were back and forth, and it was a time of a lot of enthusiasm and alternative movement stuff, it was a wonderful time. People like Sandy and K and Lou

Chamberlain, Al Smith and we will get together on a regular basis. As my memory serves me, it became an expression of need for a place for women in crisis, and I belie my feeling was that K was a person, a woman in crisis. She was having a tough time. Her husband was away, and she was, they were still married of course but he was working as a prison guard in New Jersey, and she was really trying to make it up here with their kids, but she had a great heart. Out of that came this wealth of enthusiasm and desire to do something, and this was one of the issues that came and evidently survived. I don't know if that answers it or? To tell you, my first contact with K, I don't know if this is... It was during the Vietnam War era where there was so much agitation going on, and I lived up in that area, I think it was on 7th Street and I worked for the American Vet Service Committee. And because, I remember it was a Muskie the Governor time, when they were trying to choose the presidential candidate, and all these kids were just becoming voters, and choosing me to be the Democratic Ward Chairman of that particular ward... terribly because I am not a very political person, but I happen to be the ward chairman. I remember when choosing delegates to the state convention we divided up into quarters, all the Muskie people went in this corner, and they were sort of the traditional Democrats and all the McGovern people over here. OfCourse I was a McGovern person. And then we had sort of the fringe candidates, they wanted with Soey Chisholm. Remember Soey Chisholm? And she was really the radical and she was a feminist. And this woman happens to come, and she was a plain middle class looking women, and I went politely over to her and said, do you understand the Musky corner was over there? She said, "what do you mean? I am Soey Chisholm. I said to myself, it couldn't be!... So that was my initial contact with K. And our friendship developed out of that bad encounter very early on.

MH: So, do you remember the moment when Spruce Run got formed?

RG: Pretty well as I said it was sort of around my memories of the kitchen table and the need was a there and it was mainly around K's, in fact the name Spruce Run as I recall was related to a place

in New Jersey where she used to live. It was called Spruce Run and she just felt that she in her heart knew what the need was. And she also felt that this was something that other women in the area needed. It's just a matter of just sort of talking it out and you having a sense of enthusiasm. And I can't remember the attorney that was involved that drew up the papers. I don't know even if you've seen the papers.

MH: We have seen the papers.

RG: You know we just formed as these corporations; these non-profits things go. We just formed a group and went, it wasn't too long after that when people like myself just sort of became fringe people, but that's alight. You know, breathing is important when something comes.

MH: Lu remembers that you roped her into signing the incorporation papers?

RG: That's probably true, yeah.

MH: How did you meet Lu?

RG: At the same time, the inner-City Ministries have been sort of laying down, and that's a wonderful story of itself. As a result, a lot of people were homeless, spiritually homeless, it was a movement. And Kay's became one of those places where people were gathering up. With that enthusiasm, social change and justice issues and feminism. Your question is how do I meet Lu? I think it was just sort of that process of osmosis that there's sort of gravitation. If I remember right, we lived there for a while at the house. And became sort of a rooming house and movement center. And also, at the same time there was the Maine Community Land Trust that formed. Which was an attempt to help low-income people access property to build homes and have a chance for an opportunity for low income working people.... very active in that as well.

MH: Tell us about the inner-city Ministry, because we haven't heard about that.

RG: Well, I worked with, let me take a step back, I've worked for Pine Tree Legal assistance as a paraprofessional. And at the time I kept hearing about this group up in Bangor, I was down in the Augusta area and the American Friends Service wanted me to work with them in Maine and get an office somewhere in the state of Maine to work with anti-war peace stuff. And the most exciting thing at the time in the state of Maine was the inner-city ministries, at least from my perspective, because it was a group of you might say different ministries and remembering Max …. who is connected with Bangor just graduated from Bangor Seminary. Ron … oh what's his name? He was a Southern Baptist, which surprised me knowing him because I was a Southern Baptist and have been pretty narrow minded. It was the head minister and the church itself was owned by the Southern Baptist it was an old former Methodist Church. And Ron had this vision of having a multi-faceted ministry, multi-denominational. I was Quaker and Max … was Congregational, Ron was Southern Baptist, and it was also a place where anybody could come and stay, homeless.... basically, became a homeless center.

MH: This was here in Bangor?

RG: In Bangor on Pine Street. The church has been torn down since. I don't know if you talked with Dave Davis, he would be a good resource too for you. Dave comes from Orland, and became active in that, but there was a food distribution here they had all the food surplus, I remember they used to empty the old basement with tons of food there to distribute. A lot of the anti-War centered out, even for the whole state of Maine, centered out of that. But the Southern Baptist Convention was getting pretty uptight about what was going on and also Ron, I wish I could remember his last name, isn't that awful? Really good fella, but he moved down to Texas ministry down here and so the ministry so folded and part of it moved to the Unitarian Church, down across from the hotel. But it didn't really have the same energy. It sorts of decentralized, which I think is a good thing.

This idea of its decentralizing to places like Kay's house, might say it wasn't official, but really carried on the vision.

MH: Did you come from Maine?

RG: I was born Bangor.

MH: You're born in Bangor.

RG: I'm a Mainer.

MH: So, you were a Quaker and were in contact with people who said this is what we need in Maine, and you were there.

RG: At the time of the Vietnam War. The American Friends Service committee in New England, which is in Cambridge, felt the need to have regional activists and they asked me to be an activist up here in Maine.

MH: Do you remember when that was?

RG: That would have been about 1968.

MH: So, had the inner-city ministry been going on before then?

RG: Oh yes, it had been going on a number of years before, and it wasn't quite as broad, and as if I could use the word radical, you know in terms of until saying 1968, 1970 when it really the antiwar movement heated up. Many of the things that happened during that time, for instance, the moratorium people going to Washington in droves and remember we hired buses to pick up students from the University of Maine but basically centered in the inner-city ministries because it couldn't be connected with things like government, university things. So, a lot of that was

facilitated by that ministry. And as I say, K, our contact with K Lucas came sort of at the tail end of that activity. Really the spirit of what was happening there moved to places like K's house.

MH: So how did it work? Did you go every day to this church and talk with the other ministers who were there?

RG: We sort of had a team ministry, but not on paper. We had our basic interests, and worked together as much as we could, as possible. I lived on 7th Street, but I also lived, when I had to right there at the church, because my main interest was in draft counseling and helping people move to Canada. And that was kind of special to me. The work that we learned over there was really very exciting and pretty scary sometimes you know. We had, for instance, military deserters would come to the center and want to move on from that. To whatever you have in helping with their legal problems so. And there was nobody else doing that type of work.

MH: So, would you say that the activists attracted each other? Meaning there was no one else that was doing that, you were doing all kinds of things.

RG: Yeah, in concert with others. And so, there it was natural attraction, and I think that just like Spruce Run, you know there is a common thread that runs through all of these concerns, and deserves justice and peace and making, I call it speaking truth to power. And Maine is a poor state, and there is a need for that kind of activity.

MH: Lou talks about how everything was just mushed together, that's how she puts it that she had so many different hats and everybody did, and then you have one meeting and then it would just blend into another meeting. It was just a common concern.

RG: I think the word that might describe it best would be community. There was a real sense of community and common concern where people would help each other out. And everyone that

was involved was low income, I mean that goes without saying anything. And we shared on a wonderful level, because of our poverty you might say. In fact, that in itself embolden the effort. In other words, we don't have anything to lose besides what's in your pocket. You can get out there and do what you have to do for what is right. Which feels right. I used to work with high school kids in the city of Bangor, because they had required ROTC down there. I don't know if you remember that, but it was required before any male graduate from Bangor that they had military training in high school, public high school. And of course, in my mind this is absolutely wrong, and so we took it on and took to the William counselor, which was a famous lawyer down there, was the one who became the attorney for our case and won the case at the same time. Anyway, these kids, and I can still see them, became very active in these social justice causes. I remember back one young woman and I wish I could get in touch with her again, she would be a reach resource for you. She was the daughter of the principal at the high school. Who got caught up in this anti-ROTC program and she was a real fire, wonderful person. I can remember she went down in the draft board and she said, I'm going to sign up for the draft today, so she went down there, and we should do it as a witness. And she said to the clerk I want to sign up for the draft and the clerk said you can't do that. Well, why not, that's discrimination. He said we can't do it and she said who do I see? And the clerk, I remember I was there with her said Well I suppose you can talk to President Nixon, the tremendous dynamic of this high school kid that just turned 18, she had red hair I remember that too. But speaking again that truth to power type of thing, making her personal witness, and that came out of that of the ROTC thing with the high school, and there was some celebration on the part of that from a small group of kids, and when they won their case in federal court, in fact, the school back down and it didn't ever get heard in the court. But just the fact that...

PD: It was just the school district that decided that they wanted to do this?

RG: The oldest ROTC program in the country is in Bangor. Military training, and over the years they say because of the history of it and it became like a sacred institution. That it became a requirement that any male student in order to graduate, had in order to get that diploma, had to have passed through the ROTC. I remember one of them, one of the students had gone and snuck in and locked everybody in the attic where they had a wired cage where all the guns were and everything, and he snuck in there locked the instructors and all the students in there. There were little things like that that kept going on and finally they said we can't do this anymore and the administration just backed off from that requirement, I mean they still had that program. But as I say, that is the type of spirit that was behind Spruce Run and so many of those things that had happened. And hadn't really survive, but that's alright, you know, I mean even that Maine committee Land Trust just as much energy that went into that, it still exists on paper, but its time had come, and it's passed and passed up in in other forms with other people...

MH: The first I saw K, she looked like a middle-class woman. Was she a middle-class woman?

RG: I think she was. I think she came from New Jersey and she hadn't been to Bangor for very long. I remember they first moved up to some place down near Belfast. They had a place and then bought this place. K and they bought that house on Hammond Street or meaby bought with the bank or whatever, but they were people who were more affluent than the average Mainer. But our heart was in it, I mean her heart was there all along. And if you know her personal story from way back, I don't know if Sam has ever told you, but she just was that person type of person who she had just a wonderful spirit. And she was in a tough place in Bangor, but she was also going to do something about it.... Thank you...

MH: And when she got divorced also was left without money.

RG: Right, yeah, right, and in fact, what happened when her husband came up here, he was pretty volatile man. And just before they divorced, he just sold the place, she was basically homeless. She moved to some places here in Bangor and then she moved downstate, and I think it was in Bath, and then ultimately in Portland. But it was tough going for her. But I think she had this wonderful joy, of course K was just sort of a jolly woman, she had good sense of humor, motherly, I mean that's a way to put it. And I am not trying to put it down at all, but she had a natural way of bringing people in and making them feel at home. All these lost souls like myself. Given the mental juices going. How the world should be a better place, she loved to write, she was a good writer.

MH: When she started talking about a place for women. Did you have any knowledge of how many battered women there were or how many women in crisis there were?

RG: No. I knew it was a problem and I also have had a feeling most of my adult life that if you're going to talk about poor people. At the bottom, the ones that have to struggle the hardest are the children. I mean, that's been the start of humanity. But I had no real sense of the need, I knew there was a need for crisis center and especially though K talked about it because this was her vision, basically. We need a place that she said to run to have full protection.

MH: In your work with the inner-city ministries, did you see the need for a crisis shelter for women?

RG: No, I didn't, but I'm sure that as that there were people who were involved with that movement were well aware of it. I was so involved with the antiwar movement and draft council, and especially draft constantly at that time. Although you were aware of the social issues you know your specialty was there and there are a number of people at the inner-city ministries. A lot of women, and other people too, who would certainly have been in tune with that. But nothing ever came around K's kitchen table.

MH: We understand that Spruce Run in the beginning really was for women in crisis and not for battered women, It was a way to help women be independent, I gather. Do you remember that some of the discussions that you had, what K really wanted when she wanted to form Spruce Run?

RG: Yeah, I think that if I'm understanding the way Spruce Run is now, it's a place, It's actually a literal physical place where women who are battered and with their children can go. I don't even know where it. I suppose it's not supposed to be known. You know it was supposed to be a place where you know nobody supposed to know except for people that need it, It's like an Underground Railroad type thing. But yes, I think the initial need, it wasn't really of a grand scheme that you could, we could even think about getting a place. You know that it had to be, you know sort of temporary kind of put together and it was so much like, for instance like what was going on with the Antiwar movement. It was like really like an Underground Railroad. Depending on what the circumstances were, I can remember, for instance, being involved with people who were the Barragan's you know, and destroying draft. And I'd like to know it was one of the Catholic seminarians who was involved in that destroying the files down in Maryland, and came up here, but he was so wrong his way and he was one step ahead of the authorities to see being involved in his situation of trying to provide safety for his wife and himself, and then ultimately being able to get a safe place. In his case it was Halifax Nova Scotia. It was that way of very much like the original Underground Railroad. And this, in a way, was that kind of spirit, you know, I mean somebody in crisis needing that space. Should they have a place to go. And I think that was the original regional side, and I think it came out of that mode of thinking. Risk taking, it's called.

MH: K and Lou both tell the story of the first client that they took up to Aroostook, who when she came back called her husband to come and get her. Do you remember any of that?

RG: I was out I think when it came to actually doing it, that was something I didn't have much to do with.

MH: They describe it in the same terms that you do. The danger of it, the underground nature.

RG: Yeah, and it would get scary sometimes in that situation, of course if you had a family member, you get beat up. The Inner City Ministries we had situations were the FBI would come it, I was taken down to the FBI headquarters a number of times because of draft issues. Sort of that type of thing, that you had to handle and how to relate to your support community. And the community is really important it's not like when Spruce Run, that's probably one of the regional reasons for it. Its not one thing, you are not an individual group putting it together, but it's a community thing and you have community support. I don't remember that specific story, but I am sure it went on. It's just as well I don't, I mean, you know, because of you shouldn't be privy to everything going, going down with those things. But I do remember that the confidentiality of it was something that was important at the very beginning. You know, that's probably the reason why I wasn't privy to that. And I don't feel bad about it either.

MH: What was Lou Chamberlain like back then?

RG: At that time, Lous was a very remarkable woman. She came from the Aroostook County, St Agathe I believe, and of course came from I remember from real big family and she had to break out from a lot of stuff in her past. I think, she came, I don't even remember why she was here in the Bangor area, but it was like, the word gets out and people associate your people and suddenly they show up and she became very active in in that. But I always married her because she was, you know, I'm not saying this in any paternalistic way, but she was a person who had to break out of where she was from and what she was as a person to really blossom. I think K was that way. She really moved to the forefront. Intellectually she was really bright, and she really had the enthusiasm to

the justice issues, so she was involved in... and another thing I think I was impressed by Lou is, she learned so much about issues, its like having come from a very conservative background and suddenly having all these laid out before you and having really moved out into it, boldly and learned that process. I think she is working with women's economic issues now.

MH: She said an interesting thing to me, when she was an upward bound. And she felt that upward bound, it made her, it removed her from her family. It changed her so she couldn't go back home again. Which is pretty dramatic.

RG: I'd forgotten that and I guess that is where I originally met her, or from that experience at the University of Maine up here in Orono. Yeah interesting. And I really believe that that was one of the real concerns of saying the Hammond St House was how do we liberate ourselves to be involved in issues and still have the support community? And that's a very trick thing. How do we do it? How do we help people? Being creative and what made their witness and you know, feel secure in that because so often we think that you have to have security quote unquote in order to do that. In other words, money or whatever it is, It's not true. Poverty, K and I used to talk about this, the issue of poverty is liberating, let me just back up and parenthetically say, my wife comes from a very poor situation in Nova Scotia. She's Nova Scotian, and her idea of poverty is different than mine. See because she grew up without having the choice about poverty, when you are on that level it's a curse, but if you can, if you can be like Lou or K or even myself, having moved out of that and say, you know well, hey, we don't have what's in our pockets to lose, we can make a witness. Because we only have the support of the community back there, whatever happens. It's a tremendously liberating experience.

MH: So what you're really saying is Spruce Run came into being because of the community too. I mean it was it was K's idea, but it was possible because you all got together and talked about it and supported each other in doing things that weren't recognized by the authorities and such.

RG: Risk taking. And I think that was the... people were taking risks and it was the antiwar movement. It was through so many other issues, even the Land Trust movement was a challenge to the economic structure of the state or the community, the established community. You see, and yet it was worthwhile trying. We used to say when we meet, and this is one of the things that happened with Spruce Run. We used to say if we don't enjoy doing it, if it becomes something like, you have to grit your teeth and you know if you are angry about it, it's not worth doing. I mean the whole idea, and we used to laugh about that, you know. The whole idea of Spruce Run is the fact that out of this social concern, out of the social witness, there's a tremendous amount of joy. You know, joy to me is this spiritual thing in joyous spirit. We're not talking about happiness, but the idea of that you enjoy. Fail or succeed, I mean, that becomes almost a secondary matter. You pray that it would succeed and maybe it will succeed to a point where it's no longer needed and praise the Lord if that ever happens, you know and then it's served its purpose. So that's sort of the idea behind it. I would just want to say, I'm a committed Christian, I've been that way all my life. And I'm back as the pastor at Church today. K and Sandy, and Lou perhaps, she grew up a Catholic. Especially K and Sandy were pretty anti-Christian. Especially Sandy... But the beauty of all of that was that you know that didn't make any difference. The base was that we had the common concern to see the right done, because what's right is also gospel truth as well as social. Two social witnesses truths, as others were involved in that whole time.

MH: And what was the truth? Justice?

RG: Justice and peace. Community, simplicity. You know economic, what I call exploring economic alternatives. Of course, I'd even throw in that whole thing of decentralization. Yeah, this is sort of an economic thing. You know what's happening in our world, everything gets bigger and bigger and more unmanageable as far as individual people go, but we need to constantly struggle to figure out ways where we can survive and feel a sense of joy and fulfillment in our lives. I also say the idea of cooperation. Just the other day some workers took over a factory that's going out of business. A worker owned business and they almost apologized the fact that they were willing to cooperate because you now the issue should be... we have to examine that. I think that that was part of the concern at that time.

MH: How, you said Sandy was a feminist. How strong of a feminist was she?

RG: She was there right on the lines with me, because I grew up in a conservative Republican home and you know, I had to grow out of it too see, and that was, the token, male chauvinist pig or whatever. But at least we're there with it. But she was very strong, and she was making modern discoveries about herself. One of the things K did with her kids long before the homeschool movement ever took hold you know.... Is K wanted to have this kind of free and open education for her children. And I remember there used to be a school up here... and one of her boys went there, John went there, but she wanted to nurture her kids in that free spirit, and I think that Sandy really became a free spirit out of that desire her mother had. And she didn't hesitate to have some lively arguments with people like myself. And I appreciated that.

MH: Where did Kay get this, she was the wife of a prison guard?

RG: I don't know if Sandy ever talked much about K's background and I don't know as much of course.... Is that K grew up, her dad was never really much part of her life. And as I understand, her mom had to really struggle, she was an only child in that situation. To keep things together, her mother

was a very conservative women, but K and growing through that, she has this natural, I really believe its a natural gift, just loving people. And she you know, she was inquisitive, she was creative and she just had this wonderful, she just embraced people and regardless of who she could have married or what her situation could have been, I think she had been able to work it through, with just by who she was spiritually.

MH: And how did you get to be an activist?

RG: When I hadn't signed up for the draft at 18 and I figured you know, I can remember just quickly said and I mentioned, my family's Republican, conservative, old Yankee stock people, and I remember we had the army recruiter coming down the local high school and saying, it's not a question of if you go in the army, but it's a question of when you go in the army, and I said to myself, it's a question of never going in the army and I signed up as a conscientious objector and had to struggle through that personally. And that was the beginning of the journey.

MH: And when was that?

RG: Well, that was when they had the CEO, I mean you had to sign up as a conscientious objector, yeah, and that was back in, it was after the Korean War and it was an unpopular, in fact, I was the first one in my draft board and they just did not how to deal with somebody coming before them saying they want to be a conscious objector because everybody went, you know.

MH: So it's sort of like K. You knew, even though you came from a family that wasn't encouraging you.

RG: And even my church was I suppose that's why I became associated with the friends at that time, the Quaker movement.

MH: Was there a large Quaker movement in Bangor?

RG: No, not in Bangor, but Maine there are a number of Friends. And you know it's, and it's amazing how those things fall into place. As I was saying to my wife, this struggle... what should we do as we get to retirement, and it's like let's not worry about it, you know things fall in place and you have your community and you may not have a lot of money, it's never been that way anyways. And that was the spirit behind Spruce Run. I think we even had trouble raising the fees to buy the papers.

MH: I'm interested too. You said that in Maine everybody is poor.

RG: Well, I don't think everybody is poor. I think Maine if you wouldn't describe them and you know this idea of two Maine's is really true. You know you get down to the affluent part of Maine bringing jobs and everything. But then you get up in this area that, It's really the story of the working poor and I think one of the real telling events in my life was working with Pine Tree legal as a paraprofessional and I worked with Tom... I remember he was a fellow starting the end Indian case down... Wonderful group of lawyers who had in their hearts to deal with the issues of poverty in Maine and I remember I used to go around. I was sort of a foot person to help people go through bankruptcy. I got to be a bankruptcy expert as well as a draft expert.... I had a case I remember where a little boy had Leukemia and his family were working people. They worked hard, you know, and their son was eight years old, caught Leukemia. They went to bankruptcy, but they had to wait another eight years to go through bankruptcy and waiting for, wait till the boy died. You say that's impossible. That's insane, you know, and you get angry about that stuff.

MH: So really, if you just open your eyes in Maine you see it.

RG: Yeah, you see it. And you see it every bit as much today as you did back in 1968-70 or when all of these stuff was taking place. I think the only sad part is that many people have become burned out. In fact, I think as I look at it and think that people I have associated with over the years. One

of the things that surprises me most is how many had gone over to this mode of, what I call the success mode. Trying to become financially secure and you know. And I still maintain contact with many people that I've had over the years, but on the other hand there are still those like Dave Davis and Sam Lucas, and you can name them all who are really just grant spirited people and they get older, like myself.

PD: This is a good place to turn this over.

[End of transcript]